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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000421

SIPDIS

FOR AF/PD, AF/S, AF/RA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [MI](#)

SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION - GUANTANAMO, LILONGWE

1. "Watch what you say: words can be deadly weapons"

2. The independent daily, "The Times" of May 18, 2005, carried an opinion piece by one of Malawi's prominent journalists, Jika Nkolokosa, on his regular column "Take it or Leave it". Nkolokosa chides Newsweek for the purported desecration of the Qur'an story which was retracted after a deadly retort. Excerpts follow.

3. .So when I first heard that Newsweek had published a story alleging that some American servicemen at Guantanamo Bay had desecrated the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an, I was taken aback by the servicemen's lack of sensitivity to a people who already suspect that the West was out to trample on their faith. I wondered to myself what anyone stood to gain by flushing the Qur'an down the toilet and worse still to tell the world about it. Was it just an idle boast or was it a taunt intended to demean Islam?

Somehow I have always expected the American to defer to other people's religions considering that most of them left their European homelands to escape religious persecution and settled on strange shores to exercise their religions freely. How could such a people turn around and make a mockery of another people's beliefs?

It all seemed completely reckless and inconsiderate to me. I somehow expected greater respect even for a religion that has not done much to publicize itself in the West. After all, the major religions of the world do not differ much in their basic tenets, the most common one being the appeal to man to do unto his fellow as he would have others do unto him. What is there to desecrate a book with such wisdom?

.Whittaker retracted the story and apologized to all those who may have been hurt by it. Sadly that came a little too late; the damage had already been done.

.Take it or leave it, we live in a world where we may not share the same dogmas. We therefore have to be extremely careful about what we say. I am still trying to come to terms with why the esteemed news magazine said what it said. Sure it came in a moment of lapse of judgment, but that batters the magazine's international reputation.